

Sunday, September 15, 2019 – 14th Sunday after Pentecost
“For the Sheep”

Ezekiel 34: 11-24; Luke 15: 1-10

Rev. Derek S. Klemm, Mountain View Lutheran Church, Las Vegas, NV
Devotional Contemplation Structure

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

Often, in a large animal litter there is a pecking order that dictates which babies get the first turn for food, for water or for warmth next to Mom. The biggest and strongest of the litter is the alpha animal, and enjoys special advantages – their strength perpetuates their dominant position. On the other end of the spectrum lies the runt. Many of us have a soft spot in our hearts for the runt – they’re the smallest, weakest, most helpless of the litter. Some of you probably have adopted runts as pets. Precocious Wilbur the pig from Charlotte’s Web was the runt. The truth though is that for all our romanticizing of the runt, often they’re left out. If resources are scarce, they’re the ones left to die. And in some litters, especially among pigs, the mother and littermates are known to eat the runt when food is hard to find.

How similar a situation we find in Ezekiel’s writing today – in the section right before our text, God has been condemning the kings and leaders of Judah, who He refers to as the nation’s shepherds, for taking care of their own needs over the needs of their flock – not taking time to strengthen the weak, heal the sick or bind up the injured, not chasing after strays or searching for the lost – by encouraging the people to marry outsiders that brought idol worship into the land, promoting materialism and keeping up with the Joneses while sick people and widows and orphans and folks who had made bad choices early in their lives were all treated like they were invisible. God intends for the shepherds – be they civil authorities or pastors, to care for people first.

Look again at our image and you will see the most basic image of care to which we can relate – the care of a mother, standing by, giving of herself while her offspring are nurtured. She supplies them with nutrition. She gives them a measure of protection, of reassurance. And though he’s not in the picture, we can also see that this is a shepherd who cares for His sheep – they are standing in the pasture, with food to eat. The mother has been sheared, her ear is tagged – this is no wild sheep wandering on her own, she is under someone’s protection. The bottom of a fence is in the background – stopping sheep from straying away and keeping predators out.

So too is a shepherd looking after the needs of all the sheep of Judah. God is not content to let His people go without proper care. His undershepherds had done poorly. People had fallen into worship of false gods. Kings made bargains with foreign nations, now shaking down Judah and like a business that had accepted so-called help from organized crime was being forced to kick up more and more in tribute to the tyrants. These bargains would end with the flock being scattered over miles and over borders, to faraway and unfamiliar lands. A good shepherd does not allow this to happen, rather he looks after His flock. God will regather the lost flock.

Such a simple thing to say, and such a harder thing to do. It is, after all, God's mission – that all people would know of Jesus' love, of His blood shed on the cross, of our relationships to God being restored. Yet, the search itself is an ongoing, a lifelong endeavor, a charge that He places on the rest of us to assist in doing. Because there are people in all our lives who do not know God's care, whose souls are not encompassed by a God's protective gate. The best thing that we in the church have to offer is not anything that we do – it is God's binding up of our injuries, God's feeding of the weak and hungry – in needs of both body and of soul, God's rest and peace and protection so that we can lie down and rest even as hardships circle all around the gate – God's protection keeps us safe.

If you'll turn your attention back to our picture – does it strike anyone as somewhat sad? Yes, there is the ample grass in pasture, the protective gate, the loving mother – except, there's also a lamb off to the side, gaze fixed on its mother. Its siblings seem oblivious as they eat their fill, and take care of number one. I wonder – will the mother be able to feed the other lamb? Or will he be an afterthought? I wonder, what would happen if the other lamb approached? Do you think the other two would give way and let him eat? Would mother even care? I don't know... I've witnessed the feeding frenzy of multiple dogs eating. Until the top dog (or the owner intervenes) the middle dogs have no issue with greedily eating everything set before them, leaving the weakest with nothing. I don't know much about sheep, but I doubt they're much different.

God's anger burns against the selfish sheep in our text. As if it wasn't enough that kings and priests were unfaithful to God, leading their people to be devoured by false gods and to be

under threat by foreign powers, the people themselves fail to show compassion to each other. The rich, the privileged, the popular, the educated, already have access to the best – and still, they proverbially trample the pasture of weak and muddy the clear water for the rest of the flock. The problem here is contempt – looking down on those who weren't as gifted or smart, those who made bad decisions, those who "sinned." Beyond contempt, so too is there lack of compassion – going on living life to the fullest without a thought or care for the hungry, the sick, the injured, the widows, the orphans. Instead, there's pushing and shoving to make it to the top and keep their rank. It happened in the form of unfair wages, unfair treatment. It happened when there were feasts, celebrations, and the lesser in society weren't invited to the table of the rich.

And it was happening in our Gospel text today as well, as Pharisees sneered at Jesus for eating with "sinners," – if He really was a great prophet, why was He wasting time with "those people?"

There is a warning built in for us in the church today – let us never become puffed up with monuments to ourselves, our name, or our greatness. It's just like these sheep – what good is it to have triplets if one is left out to starve? Certainly, we want more people in attendance at worship, we want higher school enrollment, we want a balanced and healthy budget, we can't wait for the master plans for our building that we're working on now, with your input from a couple weeks ago, to come to fruition – but why? For bragging rights when we talk to people from another church? For a bigger budget? Better cash flow? To have the cooler building than the place down the road? Or because ever more people are being formed by the Word – chosen, adopted, forgiven, sent on God's mission to love and disciple others? Let the only reason for any of these things be so that more people can be cared for and loved, protected in God's pasture!

Yet, for the sadness this image conveys, of a lonely lamb on the outside, encouragement, yet again. This lamb is obviously not the runt. In fact, it appears to be big and strong, maybe even a little bigger than it's sibling suckling closest to it. The appearance of the lamb speaks to the care of its shepherd.

In verse 22 of our text, God resolves that His sheep will not be plundered, that over them He will place one shepherd – His servant David.

Revisit our Gospel text once more, where a son of the line of David fulfills the Father's promise of a shepherd who seeks after the lost sheep. This shepherd is impartial and fair. He isn't impressed by the strength of the strong. He isn't impressed by our reputations or our influence or our wealth, our intelligence, our looks, our education, our family, our nationality, our resume or anything else about us. He instead shares His love with all His sheep and tends to them.

The problem, you see, with the sleek and the strong is not their strength – it's using their strength to intimidate, to oppress, to win a name for themselves. For all who admit their failings, their need for the care of the shepherd, who confess their sin, God is faithful and forgives that sin – because our Good Shepherd laid down His very life for the sheep. Predators attacked, knocking down the gate, seeking to devour – but the Good Shepherd put Himself in between the hapless, helpless sheep and gave up Himself so we might live. The truth is that all people, whether they think they're strong or whether they know their faults, are all weak and in total need of the protection of Jesus. The great news is that Jesus is always faithful. He will not lead us astray and He will not sell us out. His Word nurtures with ample food for all and He keeps chasing after people who struggle and searches relentlessly for people who have forgotten or never knew His voice. He is impartial and good to all. In Jesus' name, Amen.